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The Deterioration of Soviet-Iranian Relations

An Intelligence Memorandum

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The Deterioration of Soviet-Iranian Relations (U)

Summary

The current downturn in Soviet-Iranian relations has demonstrated the fragility of the relationship that has developed since the revolution and brought a profound mutual distrust into the open. Several longstanding irritants—Iranian support for the Afghan insurgents as well as for Islamic dissidence in the USSR, Iranian suspicions of Soviet intentions and periodic repression of leftist elements, and unresolved economic differences—have flared up simultaneously in recent weeks. In reaction, both countries have reduced their efforts to maintain the veneer of civility that had marked recent bilateral contacts.

Before this decline, each country saw some advantage in maintaining a semblance of good relations. The Iranians wanted Soviet support in countering Western economic sanctions. The Soviets hoped that such support would foster a workable political and economic relationship as well as a favorable climate for the strengthening of pro-Soviet elements within Iran. The recent angry rhetoric on both sides suggests that these anticipated benefits are not currently compelling enough for them to contain their mutual antipathy.

The Soviets, however, probably will try to prevent the deterioration in relations from going any further. They may suspect that Iranian Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh is seeking to provoke them, hoping that Soviet-Iranian tensions will in turn produce a resolution of the hostage crisis; such a suspicion would motivate the Soviets to restrain their own reactions and continue their efforts to undermine Ghotbzadeh, while courting Khomeini. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that they believe relations can be significantly improved in the current context, and they may, therefore, be more willing to encourage and support antiregime elements and policies within Iran.

The above information is Unclassified.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for the USSR, the Office of Strategic Research, and the Office of Economic Research. Research for this report was completed 16 July 1980. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, External Branch, USSR-EE Division, OPA, on [redacted]

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Soviet-Iranian Relations** ☐

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**Soviet Concern
About Afghanistan and
Islamic Dissidence**

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The Soviets' apprehension and anger with Iran's outspoken support for the Afghan insurgents, publicly muted in order to avoid antagonizing the Khomeini regime, intensified with Iranian Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh's flamboyant performance at the Islamic Conference in Islamabad in mid-May. The Soviets were further disturbed by Ghotbzadeh's leading role on the three-man committee on Afghanistan set up at Islamabad and were infuriated by his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua in Oslo on 12 June. ☐

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Soviet media criticism of Ghotbzadeh, who has long been strongly anti-Soviet, began in early June, when a TASS report charged that if his threats to create a base in Iran for Afghan insurgents were implemented, the consequences would be "most dangerous." The intensity of the attacks increased sharply following Ghotbzadeh's meeting with Huang Hua. TASS and *Pravda* commentaries in late June and early July attacked Ghotbzadeh and "certain circles" in Iran for aiding counterrevolution in Afghanistan and charged that a "center of armed provocation" had been established in the Iranian town of Mashhad, allowing the CIA to operate on Iranian territory. ☐

These articles also highlighted allegations concerning the activation of US-backed, pro-Shah elements in Iran and linked the United States both to counterrevolution within Iran and to a policy of support for the Afghan insurgents. One objective of this approach was to discourage Iranian support for the insurgents. In addition, by suggesting that Ghotbzadeh, in his support for the Afghan insurgents, is also supporting counterrevolution in Iran, the Soviets were trying to undermine him and emphasize their continued support for Khomeini and the Iranian revolution. ☐ 25X1A

Soviet concern about Iran's interest in exporting the Islamic Revolution also surfaced in mid-June. *Turkmenskaya Iskra* of 15 June carried a speech by Turkmen First Secretary Gapurov in which he included Gorgan Radio Center and Mashhad Television in Iran among those "foreign anti-Soviet special services" directing disinformation and hostile propaganda at the population of the Turkmen Republic. This is the first public expression of such sensitivity to Iranian broadcasts since the revolution. ☐ 25X1A

A newfound Soviet willingness to goad the Iranian regime was suggested by the Baku episode of late June and early July. Iranians clearly believe the Soviets orchestrated the sit-in at the Iranian consulate by pro-Soviet Iranian exiles demanding to return to Iran. The demonstrators reportedly have ties

to the Tudeh Party, [REDACTED]

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On 7 July, perhaps concerned by the strong public Iranian response to the Baku incident as well as by the high level of anti-Soviet rhetoric in the Iranian press, the Soviet Embassy informed the Iranian Foreign Ministry that elements hostile to the USSR were planning provocative actions against the Embassy and demanded that Iran take measures to prevent this. The next day, the Soviets were given pro forma assurances by Ghotbzadeh that the necessary steps had been taken to protect the Embassy, but Moscow must know that in fractionalized Tehran, such assurances have little value.

[REDACTED]

**Iranian Distrust
of the USSR**

Ghotbzadeh's recent, sharp attacks on the Soviet Union reflect both Iran's concern about current Soviet rhetoric and policy and a deeply rooted Iranian belief that the Soviets are using their personnel in Iran for subversive purposes. While Iranian suspicions are not new, they were publicly demonstrated for the first time since the revolution by the arrest and expulsion of Soviet First Secretary Galvanov, reputedly a KGB officer, on charges of espionage in late June. [REDACTED]

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Ghotbzadeh, under personal attack by the Soviets, appears particularly to have latched onto the Galvanov issue as a means of playing to Khomeini's opposition to Communism and his active mistrust of Soviet and Tudeh Party activities. The success of Ghotbzadeh's campaign to date is demonstrated by the fact that the organ of Iran's rightwing Muslim party (controlled by Ayatollah Beheshti) joined the attack on the USSR on 1 July, asking rhetorically if the Soviet Embassy is "not also a nest of spies"? This article may have been particularly worrisome to the Soviets, evoking memories of similar remarks by Khomeini before the seizure of the US Embassy, and may have contributed to their subsequent decision to demand protection for their Embassy. [REDACTED]

In press conferences on 2 and 4 July, Ghotbzadeh went on the offensive. He accused the USSR of widespread espionage in Iran and said Iran plans to close its Leningrad consulate and open one in Dushanbe in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, near the USSR's border with Afghanistan. Given Soviet sensitivity both to Iran's support for the Afghan insurgents and to Iran's commitment to export the Islamic revolution to Muslim areas of the USSR, Ghotbzadeh clearly expected the USSR to refuse (as it has). In that event, he said, the USSR must close its consulate at either Esfahan or Rasht. He

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then said that the Soviets were being asked to reduce the size of their diplomatic representation as well as the number of nondiplomatic representatives in Iran. He asserted that the Revolutionary Council had decided the number of Soviet diplomatic personnel in Iran (about 40) should be reduced to a number equal to the Iranian diplomats in the Soviet Union (about nine).

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Ghotbzadeh also referred critically to the Tudeh Party, accusing it of being composed of Soviet agents and threatening to eliminate it. The Tudeh Party has been operating quite freely in recent months, seemingly protected by its own support for the regime; this new threat of repression will be viewed with considerable concern by the Soviets, who have viewed the Tudeh as their main instrument for gaining leverage over an eventual leftist regime in Iran.

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Economic Issues

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demand by Tehran. The Soviets had clearly hoped that their efforts to assist Iran in circumventing Western economic sanctions would help to soften Iranian demands.

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When the Soviet-Iran Economic Committee met in Moscow in mid-June—its first such meeting since the fall of the Shah—the issue of energy was on the agenda. No agreement was reached, however, and little if any progress appears to have been made toward reaching a compromise. Iranian Oil Minister Moinfar stated on 5 July that the Soviets were still refusing to meet Iran's "just demand" for the price increase.

Iran, for its part, reportedly is dissatisfied with Soviet demands that goods transported to Iran via the Black and Caspian Seas be transported aboard Soviet vessels. In an apparent reference to this dispute, a Tehran paper on 26 June reported Soviet rejection of an Iranian proposal to establish a "joint shipping company" to move cargo. Perhaps also referring to the issue, the Chairman of the USSR's State Committee for Foreign Economic Relations, Semen Skachkov, stated on 27 June that Iran should consider upgrading "other means of transportation" (for example, rail and truck) as well as shipping.

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Other questions apparently also have been causing difficulties; one of these may have been Iranian accusations that the Soviets have too many personnel stationed in Iran, perhaps suggesting a subversive intent. In his comments to the press on 27 June, Skachkov seemed defensive in his assertions about the number and function of Soviet experts in Iran. He said the USSR has a manpower shortage itself and has no interest in sending any unnecessary experts to Iran as is alleged in some Iranian papers. That this question has in fact been controversial is further suggested by Iran's demand that the number of Soviets in Iran be drastically reduced. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

The Soviets almost certainly would have preferred to avoid the current downturn in relations. They have been seeking diligently to convert Iran's dispute with the United States into an expansion of their own presence and influence in Iran, and they probably believed that Iran was interested in the economic bait they were offering. They had certainly hoped to mold a workable relationship and to gain time for pro-Soviet elements to strengthen their position within Iran. [REDACTED]

The current situation may prompt a reassessment in Moscow of its policy toward Iran. Some Soviets may argue that it is pointless to attempt to mollify the Khomeini regime, that the USSR is unlikely to make any progress with the elements currently dominating Iran's political scene, and that the USSR should now pursue a policy of intensified support for leftists and minorities within Iran with the goal of undermining the government. Others are likely to urge caution, however, arguing that the left does not yet have sufficient strength to seize power and will not for some time, that increased Soviet support for the left will only lead to intensified repression of the leftists by the Islamic regime, and that the USSR's most prudent course remains one of patience and continued courtship of the Khomeini regime. [REDACTED]

The Soviets will almost certainly continue to pursue elements of both policy approaches, but may believe that increasing emphasis should be given to encouraging antiregime tendencies within Iran. They will continue their efforts to deal on a formal level with the current regime, but they may be less willing to make concessions. Skachkov already implied as much in his 27 June interview, when he said that the USSR does not provide assistance to Iran and that Iranians should recognize the fact that the USSR must also benefit from economic agreements [REDACTED]

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The Soviets may tone down their own rhetoric, hoping that a hiatus in media attacks will help calm the atmosphere, restore some degree of normality to relations, and prevent any normalization of US-Iranian relations. The success of such a tactic would obviously depend on the Iranian response, and this in turn will depend on the state of play in Iran's internal power struggle. In any event, the Soviets will certainly keep trying to differentiate between those pursuing the true revolutionary course prescribed by Khomeini and those like Ghotbzadeh, who they imply are working against it. ☐ 25X1A

The Soviets may combine their continuing efforts to seek accommodation with stepped-up support to leftist and minority groups within Iran, hoping to hasten the day when the present regime can be successfully challenged. They may encourage the Tudeh Party to adopt a more independent line than it has in the past, and to identify less closely with the Khomeini regime and more closely with other leftist elements with the goal of establishing a united front capable of seizing control. There are currently numerous indications of a leadership struggle within the Tudeh Party focusing on criticism of Secretary General Kianuri's policy of adherence to a pro-Khomeini line. Some reports suggest the Soviets may be encouraging former Secretary General Radmanesh, who recently returned to Iran from East Germany and who has generally shown a greater willingness to challenge Khomeini and advance a more nationalistic line ☐ 25X1A

Should the Soviets decide to encourage a more independent Tudeh line, they would almost certainly advocate that this be done gradually, hoping to avoid a sharp reaction from the regime. Similarly, should Moscow increase its support for other destabilizing elements within Iran, it will try to do so indirectly and circumspectly, recognizing the dangers such support creates for the groups themselves and for Soviet relations with the Khomeini regime.

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There is little to suggest that the Soviets are considering military action in response to the current deterioration in relations. They have continued the gradual upgrading of their forces in the border region begun last December, and they clearly want to maintain the credibility of their military option—both to deter the United States and pressure Iran. But there is no indication that they have changed the status of their border forces in recent weeks. ☐

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